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# INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION IN PERIODS OF TRANSITION AND CRISIS. THE EXAMPLE OF LATVIA

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*Migration processes are amongst the most relevant issues in the geography of the Baltic States. The authors analyse the changes in migration patterns from the early 1990s until today. The focus of the study is the recent trends of migratory movements in the case of Latvia. Due to the country's economic recession, migration has accelerated in the recent years. Empirical results show the response of the migration system to the changing internal factors and external influences in the times of transition and global crisis. Long-term emigration exacerbates the problem of demographic change in Latvia.*

**Key words:** migration, Latvia, transition, accession to the EU, economic crisis

## Introduction

In the age of globalisation and transition, international migration has become increasingly intense. In this regard also Latvia's position has changed significantly within the international migration system during its nearly 25 years of independence. Important influential factors were the transformation event of the detachment from the Soviet Union as such, the accession to the EU in 2004, the beginning of the financial and economic crisis in 2009, and the agreement on the free movement of workers from 2011.

Against this backdrop, we will examine Latvia's international migration within the respective temporal contexts. We will analyse the specific consequences of the given conditions regarding spatial and social changes. Lastly, we will point out the characteristics of the migration groups in the countries of destination or in the recipient society, respectively. Hence we will interpret migration in principle within an area of tension between necessities and opportunities. On the example of Latvia, we will show the shift from migration in search of good prospects to migration triggered by the crisis.

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## **New trends in migration research and migration theory**

The international migration research has recently been enriched by new theoretical discourses. The topic “transnationalism” [23] has been added to classical and neoclassical explanatory approaches, as have the pull-push model and structuralist approach.

This concept does not analyse the actual migration process, but rather the resulting “transnational social space” [22]. Such space stretches between the areas of origin and destination, or, between sending and receiving societies, where migration is not regarded as a one-dimensional and final movement in space but as a succession of circular migrations. These circular migrations anon evoke both material and immaterial exchanges. Overall, such “transnational” interrelations have considerably gained intensity and simultaneity due to the development of new transportation and, more importantly, communication technologies. Migrants incorporate spatially separate entities into a common arena of social action. While looking back on where they came from and ahead to what is to come, they move between different sociocultural and political-economic systems. At the same time they carry out an intensive exchange of experience [12; 8; 19; 21; 3].

The notion “transnational” is — criticism may be permitted — misleading. In the provided form the linkages within such a defined social space can be outlined only partly on a nation-state basis. In this respect, the consequent usage of already existing terms such as “translocal” or “transregional” would be more precise [13]. Thereby the geographic complexity would be acknowledged appropriately.

Within multiple recurring, oscillating migrations, social networks and actor-involved network approaches play a prominent role. Actors and networks are quasi-sedimented manifestations of a social and historic contextuality: the underlying decision, the main reason and the pursued goal of migration are primarily the outcome of an individual biography. However, all three of these factors are constantly embedded and played out in regular frameworks of analysis. Thus, geographic migration research has to keep in focus the analysis of both the individual and the context.

## **Concept, methods and data**

The analysis is based on a broad empiricism. The quantitative monitoring of international migration from and to Latvia is based on evaluation of statistics, in particular of the Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia. Hence, particularly spatial contours and spatio-temporal changes can be monitored.

Information on life situations and self-assessment of the prospects of migrants, however, are based on our own web-based survey. The social network draugiem.lv (a platform similar to Facebook) agreed to publish a questionnaire for its online users. It contained questions about socio-demogra-

phic structures, reasons for migration, and migration experiences. In March 2012, a total of 2,565 questionnaires were filled out by Latvian migrants. At the time of the survey, 1,117 of them lived in the UK, 618 in Ireland, 426 in Germany and 404 in Sweden and Norway. The data from 2010 ( $n=1,005$ ) are drawn from a study in the UK that had been carried out with the same methodology.

Age structure and gender proportion of the sample match those of the web portal users, and the portal has nearly 90% of the Latvian internet users registered [4]. The majority attend the platform daily [2]. The survey's participants in 2010 and 2012 were between 16–63 or 16–71 years old, with the majority belonging to the age group below 30. As a matter of fact this also corresponds approximately to the age structure of the migrants. Thus, we can assume that the sample reveals the structure of the entirety sufficiently.

### The Example of Latvia

In the past, the external migration of Latvia has changed remarkably (see fig. 1). After four decades of continuous immigration the net migration has been falling rapidly to negative in the time of regaining independence (until today!). After intermittent fluctuations, as from 2008 emigration accelerated massively. Only towards 2011 the decline of emigration due to apparent return migration leads to a reduction of the still negative annual net migration rates. After all in 2009/2010 there was still an annual minus of almost 40,000 people, which is a respectable amount for a country with a population of 2 million.

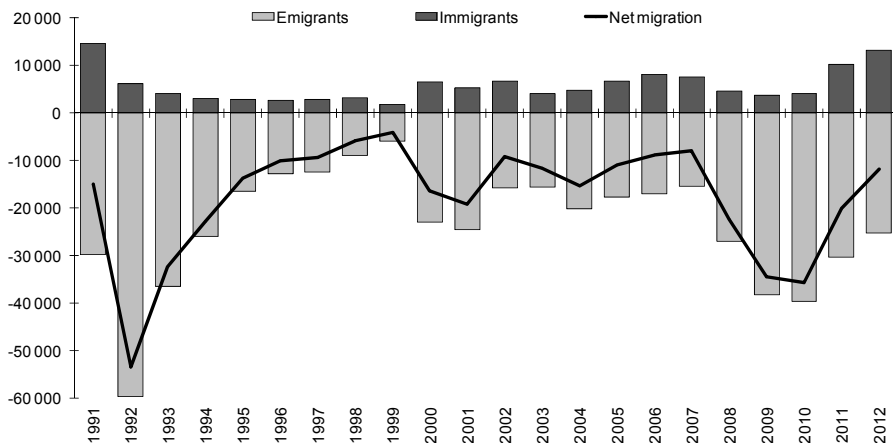


Fig. 1. Long-term migration flows in Latvia since it regaining independence (Data: CSBL Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia) [5]

Considering the research question of the variability of the Latvian migration system, three important basic elements, or determinants respectively, of spatial-temporal and socio-economic trends are to be emphasized in the given context to [e. g. 20] ...

(1) ... regaining independence, transition and EU-accession

Regained independence led to major changes in population composition of Latvia. As a result of increasing emigration in the beginning of the 1990s considerable depopulation were observed. Since second half of the 1990s a relatively stable development path followed and that led to the accession into the EU in 2004. In the following years this milestone of European integration and the favourable global economy directed to a highly dynamic period of growth. This was accompanied by a significant gain in private prosperity in the country. Within the migration system a very clear east-west shift of destinations was taking place in the sense of „The New Face of East-West Migration in Europe” [9; see also 15, 16, 14, 17).

(2) the financial and economic crisis

The impact of the financial and economic crisis ended this stage abruptly as from 2008 [11]. Throughout Europe Latvia was one of the countries most affected by the economic downturn. In 2009 the decline in GDP reached minus 17%. Considering the poor economic situation the free movement of workers from Latvia inside European Union since 1<sup>st</sup> of May 2011 led to a further increase in emigration. Since then more and more Latvian migrants seek for employment in Central and Western European countries [1].

(3) Demographic crisis and depopulation

Within the country itself the consequences of migration are exacerbated by the even longer enduring demographic crisis. Emigration and declining fertility imply a declining population development, which has an effect particularly on rural and peripheral areas [7]. The already large regional disparities in the country are enhanced by the synergy of low fertility, rural-urban migration and emigration.

### **Principles of Latvian Emigration** ***Facilitating Destinations ...***

The emigration in the early 1990s was strongly directed to the CIS countries, including mainly to Russia (fig. 2a). However, in many cases it is more or less a form of re-migration of ethnic Russians. In addition, there was a relevant emigration overseas (“others countries” in figure 2). Emigration to other European countries hardly played a role at that time. 10 years later, in 2004, the EU has become the main destination of migration. This has been reinforced again by 2010 (fig. 2b-c). In the details we can particularly see the obvious attractiveness of the employment markets of core EU countries. The new accession countries and accession candidates are hardly destinations of Latvian migrants. Also the CIS countries, including Russia are less represented.

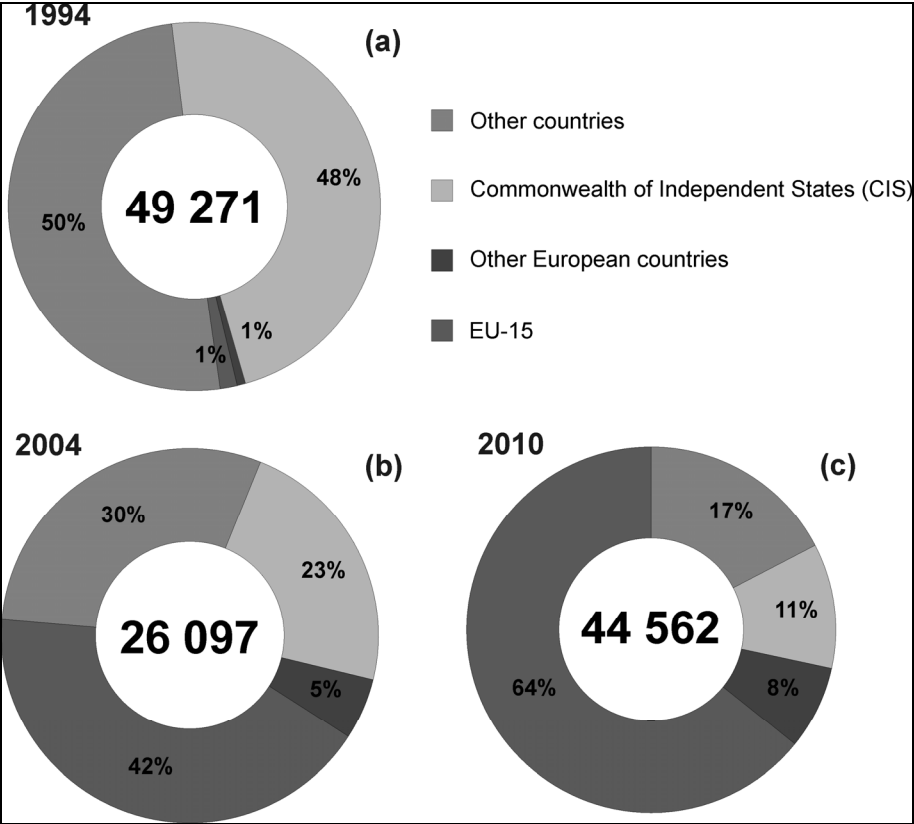


Fig. 2. International long-term emigration in 1994, 2004 and 2010 by groups of countries (Data: CSBL Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia) [5]

Emigration from Latvia to Western Europe accelerated after the enlargement of the European Union in 2004. Migration destinations vary according to economic opportunities, legal barriers, linguistic and geographical proximity. In particular, the UK and Ireland belonged to the most popular destinations in the second half of the 2000s (fig. 3). However, since 2010 also the destinations within Europe have been undergoing changes, which are likely to be related to the influence of the financial and economic crisis: While emigration to the UK is declining, emigration to Germany is increasing (fig. 4).

The outlined spatial change is expressed in the 4-year-period synopsis (fig. 5). Apart from that, especially the quantitative dimension of emigration is considerable: in the past few years alone almost 120,000 people have left the country towards the EU-15.

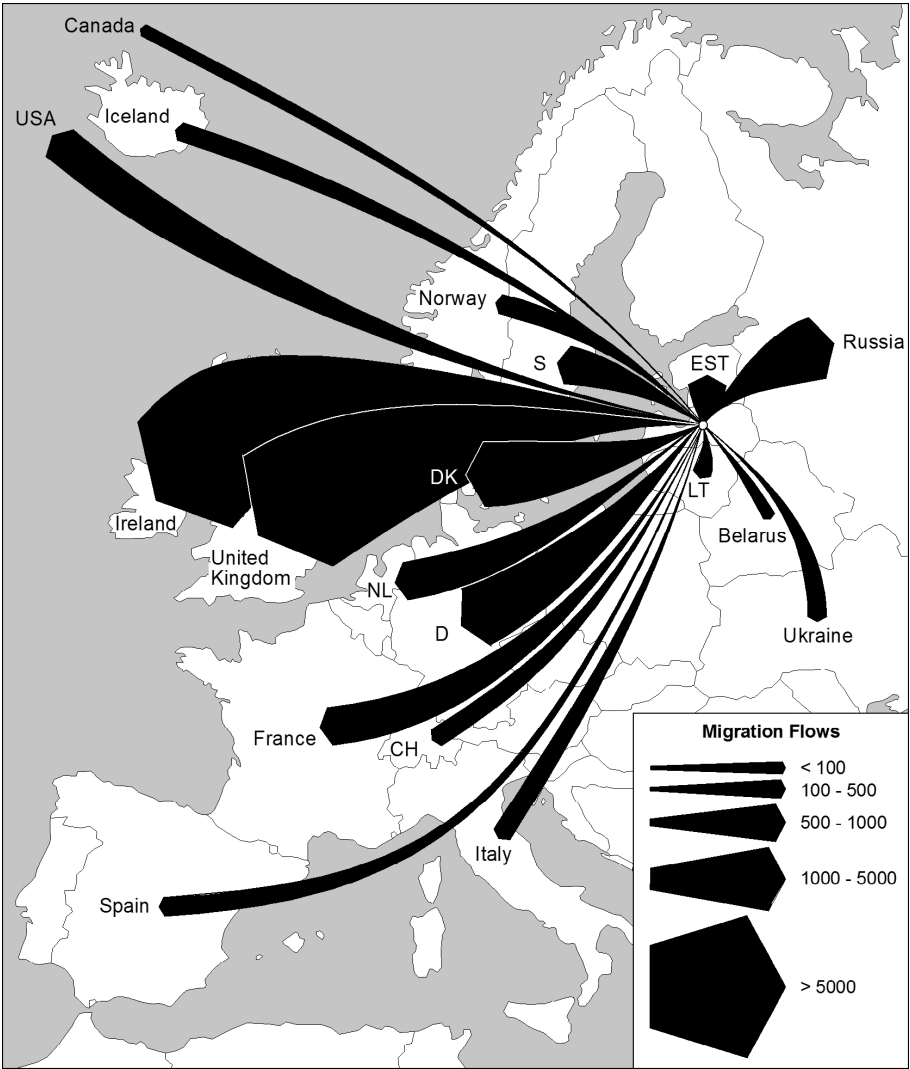


Fig. 3. Destinations of Latvian emigrants after the accession to the EU (State of 2007) [18]

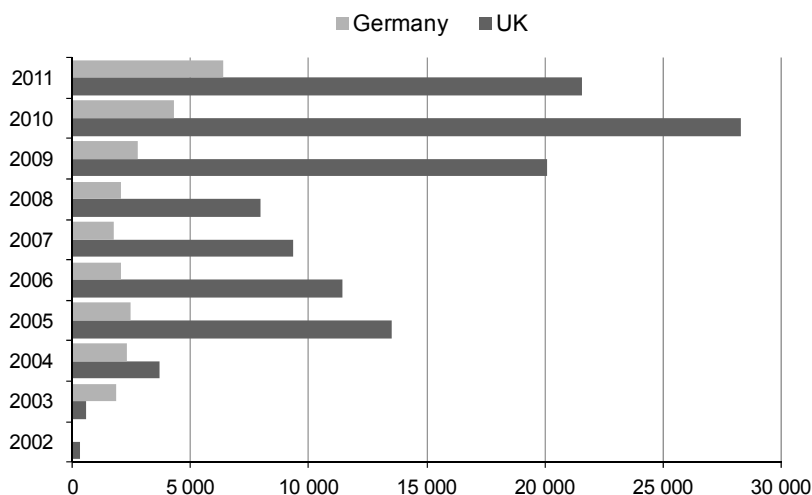


Fig. 4. Emigration from Latvia to the UK and Germany  
(data: Federal Statistical Office of Germany; Department for Work and Pensions) [6, 8]

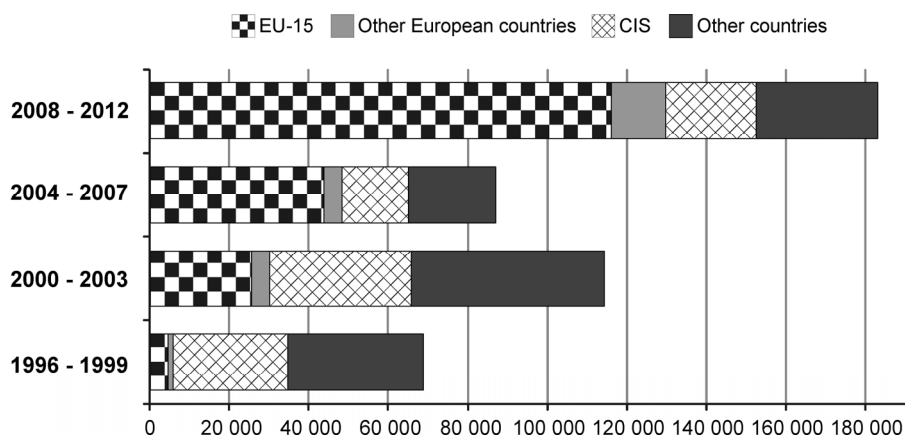


Fig. 5. Change of Latvian emigration destination countries  
(Data: Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia) [5]

### ***Motivations: Constraints ...***

The motives for migration changed as well. In the period after the accession to the EU, equivalent to the simplification measures of international mobility, the pursuit of higher income, and the search for better living conditions counted among the main motivations of migrants (Tab. 1). Both factors are also more or less named unchanged in the first survey after the beginning of the crisis. There is, however, a striking increase in the naming of "unemployment" and "financial problems and loans", each by more than double the amount. Alongside the improvement of the individual situation now obviously the preserving of the status in the home country is added. On the one hand this is related to the relatively high unemployment in Latvia. The offi-



cial unemployment rate in 2008 was 7%, and by 2011 had more than doubled up to 14.5% under the influence of the economic crisis [5]. Particularly rural areas were affected — in some peripheral (Eastern) parts of the country rates went up to 20 to 30%. Added to this, on the other hand, there was the financial burden of loans. In the time of the economic boom many Latvians had assumed mortgages in order to purchase real estate. This also corresponds to the shifts in the gender structure, since the amount of male migrants increased significantly after the beginning of the crisis. Here it seems likely that now more male family members are emigrating in reference to employment and the necessary chief income. All in all, by the end of the 2000 years migration due to better prospects including corresponding levels of freedom had obviously altered to a form of crisis migration with compulsory elements.

Table 1

**Reasons of emigration before and during the economic crisis  
(Data: online-survey 2010; n = 1,005)**

Reasons of Emigration, %	“Accession migrants” to the EU (2004—2007)	“Crisis migrants” (2008—2010)
Unemployment	20.1	41.5
Higher income	45.6	52.8
Better living conditions	54.7	52.3
Financial problems and loans	9.2	25.7
Travel and discovery	14.0	17.6
Language skill improvement	17.2	29.2
Family reasons	26.1	22.8

The results of the survey by migrants in 2012 strengthen this assumption. Mortgage and real estate loans or financial problems are at the top of the responses, followed by uncertain personal prospects and unemployment (fig. 6). Rather optimizing factors such as personal career, family reasons (family reunification) or travel and discovery ("adventure seeking") are now more or less subordinate. In many cases this is closely linked to the existential threat given by real estate loans from better times.

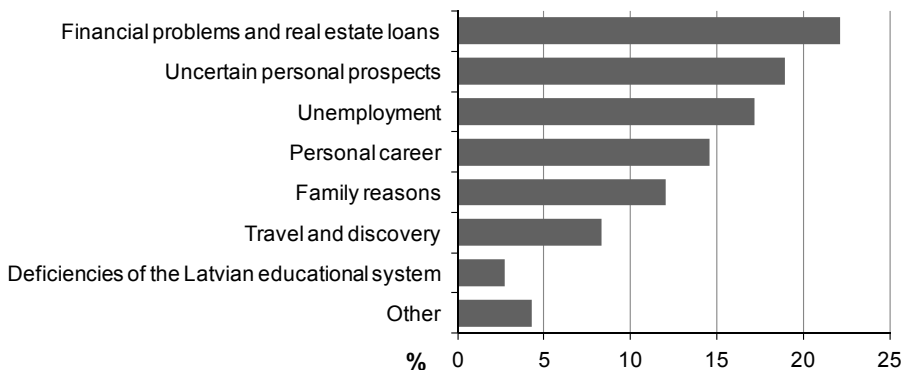


Fig. 6. Main reasons of “crisis migrants” (Data: Online-Survey 2012, n = 2,565)

## Interpretation of empirical results

The emigration from Latvia towards Central and Western Europe started in the beginning of the 21st century and intensified with the accession to the EU in 2004. The main reasons for migrants at that time were the search for better professional position, the new international experience, higher incomes and the pursuit of a higher standard of living. This has changed diametrically since the beginning of the global economic crisis in 2010: Emigration is increasingly driven by economic necessities, and many migrants are more or less forced to leave the country in order to earn their and their family's living. Nowadays the aim is the ability to preserve the achieved economic living conditions and the level of prosperity. The increasing load of real estate loans, which can no longer be paid off in times of an unstable economic situation is a substantial challenge. With respect to a regional differentiation it is worth to mention that the connection between the Latvian "housing bubble" and emigration takes more effect in the Riga agglomeration than in rural areas. Along with low interest rates and high wages during the economic boom many people took out real estate and consumer loans particularly in the metropolitan area. Thus, it seems reasonable that the number of "crisis migrants" from the Riga agglomeration is very high. Data from the survey again indicate the causal linkage between recession and the threat of insolvency.

Another characteristic of out-migration is that there were more family migrations before the crisis. This corresponds to the increasing proportion of people who had worked in Latvia before their emigration (and planned to stay there!), but then were more or less pushed to emigrate because of the deteriorating conditions. Moreover the proportion of young migrants is now higher, which is connected to the problem of youngsters like university graduates are facing in the labour market.

These new and partially surprising results need to be further analysed in terms of regional differentiations in destinations of migration (UK, Ireland and Germany) and in regard to Latvian regions with high out-migration. As indicated, currently there is a shift in the migration destinations of Latvian migrants from Western Europe to Central Europe, resp. Germany. In this context, also the knowledge of pluri-local lifestyles and forms of multi-locality need further examination.

A crucial role in that respect play also the changes and possibilities by improved communication structures and facilitated circular mobility as a tool of transnational living environment of Latvian (labour) migrants. Last but not least, the effects of globally acting economic depression internationally turn out quite differently and obviously extremely dependent on the context [13]. Insofar, further comparative analyses in the transformation context and beyond that are highly worthwhile.

## Conclusions

From first results we can currently outline the following empirical findings:

- The explicit courses and consequences of recent Latvian migration undergo massive shifts.
- Migratory movements are in a transition from “opportunity migration” to “crisis migration”.
- Regarding migration motives and effects there is a strong correlation with the real estate market.
- Current migrants are those who have to emigrate in order to overcome the stage of vulnerability in their homeland.
- In the given context migration has to be interpreted as resilience and as response to an existential plight.

This leads to more detailed considerations of a trans-regional typology in the sending countries. This includes the gradual differences of spatially differentiated migration integration into transnational framework. As much as the suburbanization induced by increasing incomes has affected mobility patterns in Latvia, the negative effects of the crisis there influence emigration and — over backward looking causality chains — the rural emigration regions. The significant differences for instance between migrant groups or the spatially differentiated impact of emigration in future have to be considered in the migration policy of Latvia, also in the context of a strategic re-migration policy.

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